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CHAPTER 1

Local Climate Praxis in Practice: Community Climate Action in Belfast

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Highlights Explores local climate praxis as transformative climate action with and in diverse communities across Belfast. Community climate action can tackle injustices, aid peace building and enable a just transition.

Keywords Climate breakdown · Multi-level climate action · Citizen participation · Community climate action · Climate praxis · Participatory action research · Northern Ireland

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As the COVID-19 pandemic forcefully disrupts our social world, it offers a glimpse of large-scale social unrest, accelerated mortality and multi-level inequalities inherent to the climate and ecological crises. It also illustrates some salutatory lessons that could be ‘read across’ from how states and communities have responded to the pandemic and they could or should respond to the planetary emergency (Barry, 2020). Faced with irrefutable scientific evidence of climate breakdown, many governments have declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency, including the Northern Ireland Assembly (February 2020); however, Northern Ireland (NI) is the only part of the UK without its own climate legislation. Offering hope that NI may soon develop effective climate policy, recent collaborations between Climate Coalition Northern Ireland (NI’s largest civil society network for climate action), cross-party politicians and legal experts culminated in introduction of NI’s first Climate Change Bill (Macauley, 2021). While emergency declarations and evolving policy frameworks are central to societal shifts towards a sustainable future, change is required across macro-, meso- and micro-levels of our social world. A fundamental question we must consider is how do we enable a genuinely inclusive, just transition to low carbon, healthier and fairer communities and societies?

Evolving partnerships of public, private and third sector groups offer insights into this crucial matter, leading the way in place-based climate action, conceptually and practically, as we elucidate in this chapter on community climate action co-written by members of the Community Climate Action Working Group of Belfast Climate Commission.

PLACE-BASED CLIMATE ACTION IN BELFAST

With approximately 343,542 people, 18% of the population and almost 30% of all jobs in NI (BCC, 2020), Belfast city is home to NI’s first Climate Commission (the first such commission on the island of Ireland). Formed in 2019, Belfast Climate Commission is one of three city-based climate commissions and two theme-based platforms established as part of the ESRC-funded, UK-wide Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN). PCAN brings together researchers and actors from the public,

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private and third sectors to collaborate on translating climate policy into action ‘on the ground’ to bring about transformative change. Co-chaired by Queen’s University Belfast and Belfast City Council (BCC), Belfast Climate Commission develops robust evidence to inform place-based climate action in the region, in partnership with local stakeholders and PCAN partners. Involving Commissioners and Commission members, the Commission’s four working groups illustrate its thematic orientation: Business and Finance; Community Climate Action; Just Transition; and Youth. The Commission is one strand of city-level climate action, complimenting and contributing to BCC-led endeavours like the *Belfast Resilience Strategy* and *One Million Trees* partnership project (BCC, 2020).

Amidst innovations in city-level policy and practice lie major challenges—we live in a high-carbon society in which macro-level systems can be reticent to change, thus leading to ‘carbon lock-in’. At micro- and meso-levels, challenges include public understanding, democratic legitimacy, acceptance and engagement with essential multi-level climate actions; and further compounding these difficulties are limited state, business and civil society capacities to drive climate mitigation and adaptation within communities and wider society. The ‘Carbon Roadmap’ developed by Belfast Climate Commission and PCAN colleagues is a vital starting point for city-level GHG reduction targets, elucidating key sectors that require urgent attention—domestic housing (39% of emissions), transport (20%), public and commercial buildings (24%) and industry (18%) (Gouldson et al., 2020). Such research demonstrates the necessity of targeted climate action across society, from individuals and communities, through SMEs and industry, to local authorities and regional infrastructure. The Commission seeks to affect change across these various, interconnected levels because ‘a resource efficient, low carbon and climate resilient city will not only be a better place to live, work and visit; it will also be a more prosperous and resilient place, better placed to respond to future economic and environmental shocks’ (Belfast Climate Commission, 2019, p. 1). With a focus on ‘bottom-up’ approaches, the Commission’s Community Climate Action Working Group (CCAWG) seeks to co-develop participative methodologies for climate action in and with communities across Belfast, as essential micro- and meso-level components of a just transition.

COMPLEXITY OF COMMUNITY CLIMATE ACTION IN BELFAST

Globally, we see exciting examples of citizen involvement in the transition to a sustainable future, including community energy projects, tree planting for carbon sequestration, community gardens, eco-villages and social movements like Extinction Rebellion Youth Strikes for Climate and Transition Towns. Recognising the importance of citizen participation, key questions underpin the work of the CCAWG—effective climate action requires changes at all levels of society, how do we involve *all* citizens in community-level climate action? Especially working-class communities, young people and others beyond the ‘usual suspects’ one sees represented in standard city and state-based green policy consultation processes? That is, the engagement and participation (not simply passive consultation) of citizens beyond what are sometimes viewed as the ‘urban, educated guilty middle classes’?

‘Community’ is often regarded a locus for meso-level citizen participation, yet how do we understand community for the purpose of climate action? This question is most pertinent in Northern Ireland where the legacy of ethno-nationalist conflict means ‘community’ can be used in an exclusionary sense to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’. As Anderson (1991) articulates in his work on ‘imagined communities’, people can frame their identity in relation to national affiliation, whereby understanding of self is entwined with attachment to a nation-state, even when one can never know all members of such a large community. Due to ‘The Troubles’, as the conflict between NI’s main social groups became known, challenges surround interpretations of ‘community’ and, at the risk of over-simplification and glossing over a long, painful history, a prevalent binary assessment means many people regard society as comprising two communities, Catholic and Protestant (BCC, 2020, p. 56). The national and religious identities of inhabitants are associated with NI’s ‘history of violent conflict’ and some suggest Protestant communities largely identify as British whilst Catholic communities largely identify as Irish (Ramsey & Waterhouse-Bradley, 2018). Devastating outcomes of ‘The Troubles’ include the deaths of over 3,500 people (14 July 1969–31 December 2001) (Sutton, 2020) and over a third of people are estimated ‘to have experienced a conflict-related traumatic event in their lifetime’ (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 952). Although ‘conflict is no longer the overriding risk

factor for Belfast’, its impact is revealed in continued division and segregation and the city is home to the highest number of interface areas in NI (BCC, 2020, p. 56). ‘97 security barriers and forms of defensive architecture’ separate communities and such residential, physical, social and educational segregation contributes to division, low levels of trust, and can add to a city’s vulnerability in times of crisis (ibid.).

To understand ‘community’ in NI, one must recognise the power of ‘historic understanding and memory’ (Deane, 1994) and how conflict-related division, trauma and hurt interact with deeply embedded socio-economic inequalities to produce negative outcomes for many citizens, and pose difficulties for transformative climate action. The term ‘cross-community’ has come to describe collaboration of people with differing affiliations along nationalist / religious lines; however, with inclusive, collective efforts to advance multi-level climate action, we can affect change ‘*across-community*’, bringing together people from across society¹ to co-develop a healthier, sustainable and more peaceful society (Slevin, 2019). After all, ‘climate breakdown doesn’t care if we’re Catholic, Protestant or Atheist’ (ibid.), and, though space does not permit a fuller elaboration, there are connections between community peace-building, the riven places of Belfast and indeed ‘peace’ or sustainability with the planet. The work of Belfast Climate Commission is (implicitly) oriented towards the dynamic interplay of people, peace, planet and place—a divided city and people, facing the climate emergency.

LOCAL CLIMATE PRAXIS IN PRACTICE

Commitment to collaboration with communities is inherent to the Community Climate Action Working Group, which comprises members from public sector organisations, community, voluntary, environmental and activist groups. We share Ledwith’s view that community is ‘a complex system of interrelationships woven across social difference, diverse histories and cultures, and determined in the present by political and social trends’ (2007, p. 32). Community can take various

¹ For example, categories specified in Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act* (1998): persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without (Equality Commission, 2010, p. 7).

forms including (1) territory or locality; (2) a communality of interest or an interest group; (3) a group sharing a common condition or problem (Wilmott, 1989, p. 2). Such framing allows us to consider climate action across Belfast's four main geographical areas (North, South, East, West), being cognisant of the city's unique social characteristics and diverse communities. In a city like Belfast, which bears the scars of prolonged conflict, participative approaches to community climate action may not emerge organically in a manner that transcends old divisions—meaning new forms of collaboration are necessary to go beyond dichotomous interpretations of community to create an inclusive community of communities committed to climate action.

Following the emergence of the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown, the CCAWG held its first meeting online in April 2020 and over two months, collaboratively articulated our overarching vision of co-creating 'transformative climate action with and in communities across Belfast'.² The CCAWG's attention to bottom-up approaches to climate action is important given intersections between climate injustices and socio-economic inequalities (HM Government, 2017; IPCC, 2018; Mendez, 2015; UN, 2019) and the necessity of participatory approaches to community engagement, beyond 'tokenistic consultations' (McNamara & Buggy, 2017, pp. 449–450). Furthermore, the highest proportion of properties at risk of flooding in NI are in deprived areas (27%) (BCC, 2020, p. 52) and low-income households are likely to have lower capacity and resources to adapt to the consequences of climate breakdown (HM Government, 2017, p. 10).

In the CCAWG's development phase, we considered principles and priorities to underpin our collective work and agreed to undertake research on community climate action to strengthen our evidence base and make informed decisions about future initiatives. We decided to undertake a participatory action research (PAR) initiative (ethical approval granted by Queen's University Belfast) as PAR is research concerned with change 'rather than simply understanding' (Dunne et al., 2005, p. 25) and our mixed methods research is underpinned by the explicit aim of gathering data to aid reflection and collaboratively enhance community climate action in Belfast. Influenced by Paulo Freire's articulation of praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it'

² For more information on the CCAWG: <https://www.belfastclimate.org.uk/community-climate-action-working-group>.

(Slevin et al., 2020), our approach to climate praxis aids knowledge co-production to co-create visions, ideas and knowledge as a basis for specific, contextualised solutions (Furuya, 2016).

In autumn 2020, we commenced an exploratory survey to gain insights into community climate action in Belfast and possibilities for future collaboration. The voluntary, opt-in nature of a formal online survey and its launch during the COVID-19 pandemic were not conducive to recruitment, particularly as many of our target group were either on furlough/ unemployed/ or balancing work and family commitments. Consequently, 25 people completed our survey; even with a limited sample, valuable findings emerged from the contributions of respondents who undertook paid and unpaid work with organisations whose reach spanned activities in one community to national and international groups, across domains such as climate activism, community development, environmental NGOs, international development and the public sector. Participants were located in North, South and East Belfast and the wider Belfast region, but there were no participants from West Belfast. Of those who participated in the research, 15 people identified as female, 10 as male and the age range spanned 18–66+ years (majority of participants were aged 35–54, $n = 13$).

Respondents shared diverse understandings of community climate action that ranged from local-level practical actions to reduce individual carbon footprints, through community-level activity as a momentum for broader social change, to critical multi-level analysis that encapsulated global-local interconnections. Interpretations included ‘climate action that involves everyone in the community and that represents the diversity that exists in that community’ (participant 2); ‘encourage and enable all members of the community to engage in appropriate action to mitigate and ameliorate climate change’ (participant 21); ‘working together to save the planet’ (participant 24). Participants shared their top priorities for community climate action, which included education, awareness-raising, reduction of GHG emissions, addressing inequality and influencing policymakers; they also outlined categories of climate action-related work they currently undertake and types of work they would like their organisation to undertake. The most popular forms of current activity were awareness raising ($n = 18$), information provision ($n = 12$), policy analysis ($n = 10$) and political lobbying ($n = 10$). In contrast, participants said they

would like their organisations to undertake activities focused on community resilience initiatives ($n = 12$), educational programmes (formal [$n = 14$] and non-formal [$n = 11$]), political lobbying ($n = 10$).

Survey data has aided CCAWG identification of next steps and provided justification for new collaborations—18 of 25 participants said there is insufficient inter-organisational collaboration around climate change. Rationale for a lack of collaboration included resource constraints; groups working in isolation; communities not being invited to policy and strategic development initiatives; a lack of leadership from politicians and councillors with regard to climate action. Participants continued to outline characteristics, priorities and participants of potential Community Climate Action Networks and most participants said they would like to get involved with a network in their area (yes = 18, maybe = 6, no = 1).

MOVING FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

As a new group, the Community Climate Action Working Group quickly coalesced around a shared goal of enhancing community climate action in and with communities, as a key element of place-based climate action. Our PAR initiative commenced with an exploratory survey to develop an evidence base to influence our activities; interviews and focus groups will be facilitated by the PAR PI (Slevin) to generate further data. Local climate praxis, as ongoing symbiosis of reflection and action, is inherent to our ongoing collaborations and a benefit of our PAR work thus far has been to raise the Commission's profile, culminating in new connections and ideas for community climate action. In tandem with planning community-level activities, the CCAWG has expanded to include some organisations who contributed to our PAR project, demonstrating early benefits of an initiative that will continue for some time. Even weaknesses within our exploratory survey offer valuable learning in terms of encouragement to undertake further engagement work with different communities.

As we strive to advance a just transition to a low-carbon, sustainable future, it is essential that we bring as many people as possible with us on the journey. In the case of Belfast, and Northern Ireland more broadly, societal inequalities and divisions pose significant challenges but

in addressing those difficulties, we have opportunities to co-create inclusive, participative, place-specific approaches to enable capacity-building, collective action and impactful results across all levels of society.

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